

Sears Department Store (Lafayette City Hall)
705 West University Avenue
Lafayette
Lafayette Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1157

HABS
LA,
28-LAFY,
2-

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

AMERICA'S CITY HALLS

HABS
LA,
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NAME: Sears Department Store
Lafayette City Hall

LOCATION: 705 West University Avenue
Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana

PRESENT OWNER, PRESENT OCCUPANT, PRESENT USE:

City of Lafayette
City Hall

SIGNIFICANCE: Constructed on a site which was once the plantation of one of Lafayette's first residents and later a monastery, the building which houses city government was originally the first Sears, Roebuck and Company store in the area.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Lafayette City Hall, previously known as the Sears Department Store and earlier as the site of the Carmelite Monastery, is located at 705 West University Avenue. It also fronts on Azalea and St. Landry Streets. The total square footage of the property is 191,400 square feet or 4.39 acres in Block 14 of the Elmhurst Park Addition.

The property is presently owned by the City of Lafayette and serves as its City Hall. The property is historically significant in that it was part of the plantation of Charles Mouton, son of Jean Mouton, founder of Lafayette and brother of Alexandre Mouton, Louisiana's first Democratic governor. He also served as president of the Louisiana secession convention. Confederate General Alfred Mouton was also a member of the family that originally owned the land. It is also significant in that the house, built on a portion of the property in 1919 by Luke Martin, was later converted and used over a 20-year period as the Carmelite Monastery. The house was razed when Sears bought the property and four adjoining properties to build the department store.

Construction on the one story and mezzanine department store began in the fall of 1956 and was completed in March, 1957. Architect for the Sears building was George L. Dahl and Associates, Architects and Engineers. G. E. Bass Co., Jackson, Miss., served as general contractor. The structural steel for the 252-foot by 182-foot building was furnished by Southwestern Steel Products of Houston and New Orleans. W. A. Burkett, Jackson, Miss. did the plastering. The glass work was by Cities Glass Co. of Monroe, La. Masonry work was by Archie Falls, Jackson, Miss. The Sonnier Co. of Lake Charles did the electrical work and the plumbing was by Standard Inc. of Baton Rouge. The concrete was supplied by Barry Concrete Co. of Lafayette and the roof was applied by the Stinson Co. of Louisiana. Frank Matlock was the architectural superintendent for George L. Dahl and Associates, Architects and Engineers.

The grand opening of the building was held on March 17, 1957 with Edward Harroz, local manager of the Sears store, Sears Vice President R. L. Taylor, Dallas, Texas and Lafayette Mayor Jerome Domengeaux participating in ribbon cutting ceremonies.

Remodeling of the building to add a second floor began in 1965. The full page ad announcing the opening of the second floor of the Sears building ran in the Daily Advertiser on July 13, 1966. The ad stated that the building now boasted "Lafayette's first and only escalator". There followed in parenthesis "moving stairway."

The original plans of the building are with Dahl, Baalen and Chapman, Inc., a copy of which was purchased by Meleton, Patin, Guillory Architects, Ltd., when they were commissioned to renovate the department store building for use as Lafayette's City Hall.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The architects considered the evolution that the building should take from that of a department store to a city hall. They concluded that the design philosophy dictated that the building's image should be softened so that it would have the dignity and amenities that Lafayette citizens would expect in their city hall. As a department store the building's image was that of vast parking areas and stark exterior facades highlighted with neon signs. The building was basically an irregular boxlike structure with large windowless walls.

The architects felt that the entrances should excite and invite the public to visit their building. To achieve this concept they designed an enlivening glass canopy to emphasize the building's main entrances. These dramatic canopies distinguish it from other local buildings, thus giving it a landmark element.

Attractive and imaginative landscaping with the planting of trees and shrubs, and the addition flower beds softened the connection between the building and the ground. A pedestrian park and fountain provided the needed transition between the building and the street. These changes along with a simplified traffic and parking arrangement provided that the necessary changes to the building's exterior to give it the humane qualities a city hall should express.

A unique treatment of the former service station area with direct access to the interior of the building provides for drive-up windows for the payment of city charges. A deck was also provided on the second level with umbrella covered tables and chairs.

The interior of the Sears building featured large undivided floor areas and was served by an air conditioning system designed for such large spaces. To avoid dividing the building into small offices, which would have involved expensive renovation of the air conditioning system, the floor space was divided into large areas with full height walls with each space housing one or more divisions of the city. Within these walls partial height screen and modular furniture was used to define spaces and work stations. The open-office-plan system is practical in that spaces are easily re-defined to meet rapidly changing requirements of departments.

For reasons of expense and energy conservation, it was decided to not introduce windows in the exterior walls. The need for visual relief within the building both for a vertical relationship of the interior functions and for a psychological relief from an otherwise windowless interior, was supplied by an "Atrium" at the heart of the building adjacent to the escalator with skylights to provide natural light and visual orientation to existing weather conditions.

The large atrium floor serves as a public circulation and display area as well as to accommodate overflow crowds during city meetings. The area has been used for the display of art and has proved quite popular in this respect as well as providing an attractive focal point of the interior. Nearby is the auditorium for city council and other meetings.

On August 11, 1977 (as authorized by City Ordinance No. 0-1550), the city entered into an agreement to purchase the Sears property. The Sears property was sold to the city on June 6, 1979 for \$2,700,000.00. This included the Sears employee parking lot on St. John Street. Acts pertaining to transactions regarding the property include Acts: 65953, 110709, 341279, 526279, 432324 and 506371.

Total cost of the renovation was \$2,603,000.00. The market value of the property had been appraised on April 7, 1977 at \$4,127,000.00. With renovations completed, dedication ceremonies were held on March 30, 1980.

The building's most recent use, prior to its renovation for the Lafayette City Hall, was as a Sears Department Store from March 17, 1957 until 1979. The land was originally part of the plantation holdings of the Jean Mouton family. Jean Mouton was the founder of Lafayette and father of Alexandre Mouton, probably Lafayette's most illustrious son. Alexandre Mouton was the first Democratic governor of Louisiana and also served as president of the Louisiana secession convention. Confederate General Alfred Mouton also was a member of that family. The site as the plantation of Charles Mouton, son of Jean Mouton. Subsequent owners in sequence were: Basil Crow; J. E. Trahan; John O. Mouton, whose family in 1843 planted many live oak trees on the land only one of which now remains; his son, Walter Mouton; Luke Martin; and the Carmelites, who sold their property for the Sears store. Adjoining properties, including the Oscar Daigle property, were also purchased to provide sufficient acreage for the proposed Sears store. The Carmelite property and the adjoining property, provided a total of 4.39 acres.

In the 19th century Walter Mouton built a house on the property, which Luke Martin razed to build his house after purchasing the property from the Walter Mouton heirs on May 26, 1919 (Act 65953) for \$4,000.00. Martin built a two-story frame house on the property set in a pecan orchard and amidst live oak trees. The property was purchased on September 21, 1934 by the Carmelites. They arrived in Lafayette on May 16, 1936. The Luke Martin house was converted for their use with austere cells being provided on the second floor and attic as living quarters. The Carmelites, who trace their order back to 900 B.C. to the days of the prophet Elias, remained cloistered in the converted Luke Martin house for 20 years, moving to their new quarters in 1956. The Carmelites' property was purchased for a Sears store on February 7, 1955 for \$116,225.00.

PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Architectural drawings, blueprints, photographs, courtesy of Meleton - Patin-Guillory, Architects, Ltd., 1981.

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